REFORM AND STABILITY: PRUSSIA'S MILITARY DIALECTIC
FROM HUBERTUSBERG TO WATERLOO

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Few interpretative structures have been as thoroughly shredded in the past quarter-century as the one describing the eighteenth century as an age of limited war. Images of battles fought in vacuums by marginalized men while normal people freely go about their business no longer survive even in textbooks. On a diplomatic level the often-cited “balance of power” embodied a dynamic of resolution as well as an ethos of stability. Europe's development after 1648 into what has been called a republic of states, all meriting recognition as equal sovereign powers within a community of common values, did not hinder near-continuous discussions of eviscerating or eliminating some of the participants. Spain, Sweden, Poland—all were at one time or another leading candidates for dismemberment in the eighteenth century.¹

The search for resolution was also manifested at war’s operational levels. In part this reflected the growing homogenization of Europe's armies: their acculturation to common patterns of training, organization, and tactics. Armies kept abreast of each others’ innovations, not least through a pattern of middle-ranking officers moving from service to service. In contrast to forces developed in different frameworks, symmetrical opponents seldom offer each other obvious windows of opportunity. To defeat a mirror image requires a combination of planning and opportunism that has defied capable generals before and since the Age of Reason. Frederick of Prussia was not the first to conclude that victory must be won at the beginning of a war, by getting inside an enemy’s loop of competence and turning his strengths to weaknesses.² The alternative was attrition: the kind of drawn-out, exhausting war no early modern government could afford.

In the course of the Seven Years’ War alone Prussia lost 13,000 houses destroyed, and 60,000 horses dead. In the province of Pomerania one-fifth of the population died of hardship and disease. Sixty thousand more died or disappeared in Neumark-Brandenburg, the heart of the kingdom. When all the losses were reckoned, even given the army’s 180,000 dead, a Prussian soldier was arguably safer than a Prussian civilian.³

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Frederick II had gone to war in 1740 essentially from the conviction that the European status quo was no longer viable. In particular the complex network of treaties underpinning the Pragmatic Sanction, the right of Maria Theresia to succeed Charles VI on the throne of Austria, could not survive Charles’s death. Austria was certain to be challenged on all its frontiers, perhaps dismembered, no matter what Prussia did or did not do. Frederick’s only real choice was whether to be hammer or anvil, windshield or bug. The accuracy, legality, and morality of Frederick’s perceptions and decisions are less important for present purposes, however, than his commitment even in this context to creating a one-time fait accompli based on the Prussian army’s ability to overrun Silesia from a standing start, then secure the province perhaps by convincingly defeating the Austrians in the field, perhaps by deterring Austria from making more than a baroud d’honneur and then negotiating a permanent settlement.⁴

Instead Prussia found itself facing a quarter century of war and preparation for war. Frederick remained consistently baffled by Austrian refusal to behave as a ‘rational actor’ by cutting its losses and coming to terms with the new status quo.⁵ Between 1748 and 1756, the King systematically refined Prussia’s army and infrastructure with the aim of creating a military system that would be at the peak of its effectiveness on the outbreak of war. His intention was not to challenge the order of Europe, but to maintain Prussia’s new position as one of its major powers. He correspondingly regarded the Seven Years’ War as a product of his enemies’ miscalculation of both Prussia’s intentions and capacities.